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André Bazin: A Brief Biography

French film critic André Bazin was born at Angers, France on April 18, 1918. He courageously and unselfishly devoted his life to cinema discourse by writing about film and film theory before a broad spectrum of readers, as well as by participating in the showing of films and discussion about them in a broad range of venues. These included ciné-clubs, factories, and even places where there were many people who had never seen movies before. Bazin was a movie reviewer, cinema critic, and film theorist, and often combined these functions.

André Bazin wrote for many different reviews and magazines, including the general review L'Esprit, founded by the liberal Christian personalist philosopher, Emmanuel Mounier, where Bazin was influenced by the ideas and integrity of the film critic Roger Leenhardt; the often more Marxist L'Écran française, a film review founded during the Resistance; the revived version of Jean George Auriol's Gallimard-sponsored La Revue du Cinéma (1946-1949); Le Parisien libéré, L'Observateur, France-Observateur, and Radio-Cinéma-Télévision.

He co-founded the important film criticism magazine Cahiers du Cinéma and probably did more to elevate and vitalize film discourse than anyone before him or since. For someone as interested in film as he was, Bazin was unusually uninterested in appearing before or getting behind a camera. At his time, Bazin was also somewhat remarkable in that he was not someone from another field such as literature, psychology, or philosophy who might be seen as dabbling in or diversifying into cinema discourse.

Although there was certainly writing on cinema before André Bazin, much of it was industry-subsidized promotion, retelling of plots, self-promotion by persons in the industry, polemics that cinema should not contain narrative or drama, diatribes against talking pictures or other innovations, or adulation of or gossip about stars.

André Bazin embodied a new emphasis, with attention to more than just the usual exploration of story-performance-theme that discussion of films routinely limited itself to or focused on. He would talk and write more deeply, including about such things as the role of the set and props in Marcel Carné's Le Jour se Lève, Jean Renoir's camera movement around a courtyard in Le Crime de M. Lange, the use of deep focus to depict both a person who has attempted suicide and a person coming through the door to the room in Orson Welles' Citizen Kane, and the non-hammering of forced nuances or interpretation into a breakfast table scene in Orson Welles' The Magnificent Ambersons. Bazin was a man who could find significance in the fact that Charlie Chaplin's Tramp kicks backwards instead of forward and could perceptively write about snow in the movies! People will probably always speak of films in terms like "funny", "sexy", "scary", "inspiring", and "exciting", but Bazin was at the forefront in ushering in new dimensions to film discourse.

An earlier French film critic, the great Louis Delluc, once wrote a one word review of a film, saying "Rien [nothing]." It is difficult to imagine André Bazin writing such a review; he generally tried to evenhandedly explain himself and would sometimes publicly retract from an earlier position, as he did with Renoir's Diary of a Chambermaid. Orson Welles once disagreed with Bazin about Bazin's characterization of Welles' lead character in A Touch of Evil; as an editor of Cahiers du cinéma, Bazin probably could have had the remark edited out, but he was more concerned with the truth than saving face.

As Raymond Bellour has noted, Bazin wrote in a time when critics and theorists viewed motion pictures or moving pictures passing before them in the actual ongoing course of movement. Since then, there has been greater ability and tendency to stop, fragment, and dissect films, and film analysis has periodically incorporated semiological, sociological, ideological, or psychoanalytical perspectives from thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Theodor Adorno, Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, or Jacques Lacan. Guy Hennebelle, at pages 3 and 4 of an introduction titled "CinémAction et les théories", in Théories du cinéma, CinémAction n. 20 (L'Harmattan 1982), speaks of a conference on cinema research almost two decades after Bazin's passing, at which much of the discussion was along the lines of Christian Metz's semiological investigations. A large number of those in attendance could not understand what was being discussed. Cinema discourse has moved in many directions since Bazin. Discourse beyond what each and everyone can understand should not be prohibited or dismissed, yet one of Bazin's virtues was that, although his writings can sometimes be challenging, they are understandable.

André Bazin was an early advocate or defender of Orson Welles, Jean Renoir, Italian Neo-Realism, Charlie Chaplin's post-Tramp films, and William Wyler. Realism in cinema was very important to Bazin and he was an advocate of less conspicuously "packaged" cinema techniques, preferring the longer take and deep focus or depth of field photography (where the viewer could simultaneously clearly see on different planes of distance, witnessing people in a room planning a boy's future and also be able to look out the window at the unaware boy, playing in the snow; see a conversation and an eavesdropper to it; or watch a person who is being stalked or shadowed, and the stalker or shadower as well). For Bazin, a cinema where the viewer was allowed to interpret tended to better reflect the ambiguity, mystery, and interconnection that is before us in real life.

Yet it should be noted that André Bazin tried to listen to others, observe the reactions of varied audiences, and be open-minded. His positions in regard to matters such as montage or editing and deep focus have sometimes been inaccurately over-simplified into absolutist views, perhaps partly due to placing too much emphasis on the fact that there was a chapter titled "Montage Interdit " in Bazin's Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? This over-simplification is misleading and productive of fascinating but arguably unnecessary controversy. Bazin preferred longer takes and explained why, questioned the suitability of montage as a cinematic attempt to mimic literary simile, and believed that when the suggestion of actual spacial juxtaposition or temporal continuity was important to convey danger or things like the efficacy of a magician (as opposed to technically unveiling his

techniques) or a dancer, it was better not to undermine the impression of reality with editing. If such matters are presented by montage, we don't as fully "know" if the child was ever in danger from the lioness, if the rabbit was pulled out of an empty hat or placed there during a cinematographic intermission, whether the dancer can actually dance a full routine or has to do it over several weeks, and if the members of the dance team can actually stay in step with each other. Though Bazin viewed montage or editing as having a "price", he was not advocating the prohibition or elimination of all montage or editing. For example, in his first Cahiers du Cinéma article, "Pour en finir avec la profondeur de champ", from Cahiers du cinéma, n. 1, (April 1951), Bazin would speak of the history of deep focus, reintroduced into interior shooting by Renoir, Welles, and Wyler, and how it had been debated but had now become established as a matter of current usage, less noticeable and striking than it had seemed at its introduction, more discrete, a part of the director's stylistic arsenal. Bazin would conclude somewhat moderately, viewing montage, long sequences, deep focus, and non-deep focus as tools here to stay, to be integrated. Bazin also stated it would be evidently absurd to deny the decisive progress that montage had brought to cinematic language, but believed it was also at the expense of other values. Aspects of montage could be integrated into long sequence and deep focus direction, so as not to sacrifice unities of time and space. Deep focus was not just a technical advance, it was a dialectical advance. The two final paragraphs of the Cahiers article would appear in the Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? article "L'évolution du langage cinématographique" in the French as well as the English, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese translations, though perhaps with some de-emphasis of the "plan-sequence" -- or long sequence -- term in the English translation.

Bazin's appreciation of Citizen Kane and his writings on Cocteau's Les Parents terribles, including "Du théâtre transformé par la magie blanche et noire en pur cinéma (Les Parents terribles)", L'Écran français, (December 7, 1948), in Le cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague" (Cahiers du cinéma 1998), pp. 188-193, and "Théatre et cinéma", from L'Esprit (June and July-August 1951), in Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?, translated into English -- with some omissions -- as "Theater and Cinema", in Gray, Hugh, What Is Cinema?, Vol. I (University of California Press 1967), and also available in the Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese editions, make abundantly clear that Bazin was not advocating that film be static like a frozen-in-place shoplifting or security surveillance camera. Still, although Bazin may have done more to give more focused discussion on direction and directors than anyone before him or since, and was certainly not opposed to film as personal expression, Bazin clearly preferred direction that did not seem to be calling attention to itself for its own sake or in an obstrusive or seemingly purposeless "hey, look at me" way. For Bazin, if the ringing of a telephone matters, it is apparently not necessary to hammer this to the viewers eyes, optic nerve and brain with cliched closeups and cuts back and forth.

Television ads, movie previews, music videos, the films of Jean-Luc Godard, Oliver Stone's recent, almost pinball-paced Any Given Sunday and the drug usage sequences in Darren Aronofsky's recent Requiem for a Dream provide obvious examples of a seeming rejection of Bazin's general preference against obvious discontinuity or sudden shifts of attention. On the other hand, when a Forrest Gump meets a President, Bob Hoskins'

Eddie Valiant encounters Toons in Who Framed Roger Rabbit?, or an action hero runs from an fiery explosion today, Bazin's intuitions are honored by showing the event and the participant(s) in the same frame. In fact, some of what Bazin was saying about montage was already evidenced in Hollywood kisses, where there often might be a shot and reverse shot prelude but it was seen as necessary to show the actor and actress together in profile or semi-profile for the kiss itself. Although televised sporting events are often edited on-the-spot, with cameras in many different positions, some events, such as Olympic gymnastics, will often be shown without cutting from camera to camera once the routine is actually started. Certain situations seem to lose something if shown entirely by editing from shot to shot, such as the situation of the person who mistakenly believes he is the object of a flirtation that is actually intended for a person behind him. It is as if incongruity or irony may sometimes need unbroken, rather than suggested, spacial connection to achieve full effect.

Moreover, average people who have caught a big fish, or met a celebrity or major politician and who have this photographically memorialized generally prefer not to rely on a Kuleshov or Koulechov effect. Rather than hang a photograph of themselves on a wall next to a photograph of a large fish, celebrity or politician, they generally prefer that there be one photograph!

Bazin's moderated 1951 remarks about depth of field can also be illustrated by a scene from Alfred Hitchcock's 1953 film, I Confess, in which Mrs. Grandfort and Father Logan are speaking on the telephone. The background behind Mrs. Grandfort is out of focus; there is probably little or no purpose in us distracting ourselves determining what books she has on her bookshelves! However, on the other end of the conversation, we clearly see Father Logan but also see Mrs. Keller, the wife of the real killer, eavesdropping in the background. Deep focus would arguably be inappropriate or unhelpful in the Mrs. Grandfort shots, but seems indicated during the Father Logan/ Mrs. Keller shots; Mrs. Keller is listening to, deciphering, and reacting to an ongoing conversation and the comprehension of both Father Logan and Mrs. Keller is simultaneously unfolding. Both Father Logan and Mrs. Keller are important. Whiplash editing or focusing and unfocusing between her and the priest would tend to force interpretation and emphasize merely fragmentary aspects of the situation rather than the whole situation.

In real life, people are not always facing each other or in the same room; and a classroom of seated students or a courtroom scene will often involve characters arranged in three dimensions, both in life and on film. The deep focus or depth of field -- which are not exactly the same -- advocated by Bazin allow us to view some scenes in a more life-like way than past practice, which often seemed to require either placing characters in what might be viewed as a sort of artificial line-up or hanging on an imaginary clothesline, or cutting or ping-ponging back and forth between them. A wife is speaking in the bedroom as her husband is brushing his teeth at the bathroom sink, his brushing breaks at her witting or unwitting mention of the name of another woman who happens to be his mistress. Both faces, the conversation, and the break in brushing are of possible significance. This might arguably be better shown -- and can certainly be more subtly shown -- in a non-fragmentary way, perhaps even more so if we are being given a clue as

to the existence or identity of the mistress or as to whether the wife is or is not aware. Close-ups and montage might even be viewed as conspicuously labeling, as "telling" rather than "showing", and done at the price of denigrating interrelated components of the situation; it might be noted that mystery novels do not normally highlight the clues in red ink!

In an early scene in Billy Wilder's Sunset Blvd., a film which made the cover of the first Cahiers du cinéma, William Holden's Joe Gillis walks away from Gloria Swanson's Norma Desmond as she continues to gaze at him. Deep focus allows us to simultaneously continue to watch her gaze, observe him physically distancing himself, and observe on his face the dawning recognition that she is a once famous star of the screen.

Interestingly, digital effects often are done with deep focus or depth of field; for example we are usually able to clearly see two space vehicles that are in the same frame in a Star Wars-type film, regardless of the fact that they are at different distances from us. It may also be noted that some of what may appear to be true "deep focus" is sometimes simulated, as in some shots in Citizen Kane in which obvious or not-so-obvious special effects are used.

Bazin greatly admired Jean Renoir's La Règle du jeu [The Rules of the Game], a film that not only had deep focus and depth of field in a visual sense, it also had some simultaneous and overlapping dialogue -- a sort of life-like deep focus in sound -- prefiguring Robert Altman, who would seem "innovative" to many in this regard, in the 1970s. Renoir's film was not a box office success, yet often makes the top of lists of the greatest films in film history. After Bazin's passing, Renoir would dedicate a restored version of La Règle du jeu to André Bazin.

Perhaps comparison of two short portions of two of the most famous film sequences in cinema history may provide some illustration of Bazin's preferences. Towards the end of the famous shower sequence in Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho, Hitchcock shows the descent of Janet Leigh's character Marion Crane down the shower wall, using camera movement to follow her. Our own eyes would probably do something similar. On the other hand, in Sergei Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin classic Odessa Steps sequence, Eisenstein shows the descent of Beatrice Vitoldi, the woman with a baby carriage, who is wounded, falls out of the bottom of the frame; in the next shot, she reappears at the top of a stitched-on new frame (almost as if she is moving through cars of a railroad train, or descending through a multi-storied building and has gone through the floor of a room, through the roof of a room on a lower floor, and into that room), and continues her descent. Both the complete shower sequence and the complete Odessa Steps sequence involve multiple camera positions and a significant use of editing. However, focusing on the descent of the two women, Bazin would almost certainly consider Hitchcock's choice more realistic and prefer it to Eisenstein's choice (It may also be noted that about an hour into Mizoguchi's Sanshô dayû or Sansho the Bailiff, Nakagimi descends towards the ground near a body of water; Mizoguchi finds it more appropriate to follow her than to edit during her descent).

Most of the time when people speak or write of André Bazin in connection with anything other than Bazin on a particular director, film, or genre, much of what they say is based on their readings or first or second-hand impressions from an article or articles that appeared in the first volume of Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? It might parenthetically be noted that the very title of the book -- in English, What Is Cinema? -- suggests that an inquiry will take place, but it does not promise a definitive and final conclusion anymore than the song title "What Is This Thing Called Love?" does. Moreover, neither the translations nor the present single-volume compilation from that four-volume work contain the entire text of Bazin's original preface. The following penultimate -- or next-to-last -- paragraph may possibly temper or clarify our perceptions of Bazin's intent:

"Cette première série est donc composée d'études brèves ou longues, anciennes ou récentes, groupées autour du thème critique suivant: les fondements ontologiques de l'art cinématographique ou si l'on veut, en termes moins philosophiques: le cinéma comme art de la réalité. Nous partirons, comme il se doit, de l'image photographique, élément primitif de la synthèse finale, pour en arriver à esquisser, sinon une théorie du langage cinématographique fondée sur l'hypothèse de son réalisme ontogénétique, du moins une analyse qui ne lui soit point contradictoire."

To roughly translate, Bazin is saying "This first section is thus composed of studies, brief or long, old or recent, grouped around the following critical theme: the ontological foundations of the cinematographic art, or, if one wishes, in less philosophical terms, the cinema as a realistic art. We will begin, as we must, with the photographic image, primitive element of the final synthesis, to conclude by preliminarily sketching, if not a theory of the cinematographic language founded on the hypothesis of its realistic ontogeny, at least an analysis that would not be at all contrary to it." This expression of general intent admittedly clearly shows a focus that is vastly different from Eisenstein's remarks that cinema is montage or Positif critic Ado Kyrou's in Le surréalisme au cinéma that "The cinema is essentially surrealist." Still, Bazin's remarks seem rather temperate and non-absolutist and do not appear to be the language of someone wanting to purge, invalidate, exclude, censor or prohibit! The omission of this paragraph from the later one-volume edition should not be seen as a disavowal; rather, Bazin had passed away shortly after the publication of the first two of the planned four volumes, the statement had been written in the context of a foreword to the first volume, and it would have been out-of-context as a foreword to the posthumous single-volume compilation.

Although André Bazin often took positions different from what might be expected, he did not seem to be provocative for the mere sake of being provocative, as one might expect or suspect of some other critics. Bazin seems to have lacked real malice towards anyone. When he did not like a film by the Préverts, he closed his review on a positive note, saying he went to see Le Jour se Lève, another Prévert-associated film that was a Bazin favorite, in order to feel better. Moreover, although he was certainly not humorless, he does not seem to go out of the way to engage in wordplay for the mere sake of wordplay or to appear clever. Though highly intellectual, Bazin tried not to take himself too seriously, and would prefer to help a person broaden their understanding of cinema rather

than feel obligated to determine the box office future of films. He once said, perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek, in Cinema 58, "La principale satisfaction que me donne mon métier réside dans sa quasi-inutilité"; yet Bazin was a man who unselfishly sacrificed his time and his health to his supposedly semi-useless vocation of cinema discourse, showing and discussing non-approved films during the Occupation and making the rounds of ciné-clubs and festivals and continuing to write as his health faded. Like the prematurely deceased director Jean Vigo -- whom Gilles Jacob has called the patron saint of cinéclubs -- Bazin literally gave himself to cinema. Yet Bazin, in person, was apparently fairly well-rounded and interested in other people regardless of whether there was a cinema connection; this sense of perspective may have been somewhat lacking in the great Henri Langlois, who should still be thanked and praised for advocating and demonstrating the importance of film preservation and availability.

Many of those -- such as Jean Mitry, Noel Carroll or Positif critic Gérard Gozlan -- who have criticized some or many of André Bazin's assumptions or conclusions, have nonetheless noted praiseworthy aspects of Bazin or his criticism. Moreover, Mitry, though generally praising Louis Delluc in his 56 page monograph Louis Delluc 1890-1924 (Avant-Scène du Cinéma, Anthologie du Cinéma 1971), pp. 33, 34, notes that the criticism of Delluc was often devoid of justification, explanation, and sufficient detail for a contemporary reader to form a reliable idea of a given film. Mitry then refers to changes since Delluc, and notes that more current writing gives a good idea of films, using as examples, Welles' Citizen Kane and Rossellini's Paisa (Paisan). Without mentioning Bazin by name, Mitry is arguably noting some of Bazin's positive influence.

Bazin was a founder of the movement known as Objectif 49 and the Festival du Film Maudit, both intended to revitalize and deepen cinema and cinema discourse. These efforts included other critics and writers, such as Alexandre Astruc, Pierre Kast, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze (a co-editor of Jean George Auriol's La Revue du cinéma and a later co-founder of Cahiers du cinéma), Claude Mauriac, Jacques Bourgeois, and Roger Leenhardt, and some directors, such as Jean Cocteau, and Robert Bresson.

On a personal level, Bazin was often noted for his generosity, his deep love for and interest in animals, and a stammer, which had contributed to him not being able to become an educator in a more institutional sense.

André Bazin was married to Janine Bazin, who would work with André S. Labarthe on the audio-visual series "Cinéastes de notre temps" after Bazin's passing on November 11, 1958. Their son, Florent, would later work on films with François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Roman Polanski, and, recently, Patrice Leconte's La Veuve de Saint-Pierre [The Widow of Saint Pierre], with Juliette Binoche, Daniel Auteuil, and Emir Kusturica, as well as Eric Rohmer's L'Anglaise et le duc [The Lady and the Duke]. André Bazin himself would sometimes write under the name "Florent Kirsch", derived from his son's name and his wife's maiden name.

Bazin and his wife Janine were a major influence on the life and career of critic and future film-maker François Truffaut. Truffaut’s first full-length feature, Les Quatre

Cents Coups (The 400 Blows), was begun at Bazin's death, was dedicated to André Bazin and ushered in what became known as the French "Nouvelle Vague" or "New Wave" at the 1959 Cannes Film Festival.

Bazin was also a significant influence on many film critics, including Eric Rohmer and, to a less direct extent, Jean-Luc Godard, each of whom wrote for Cahiers du cinéma and went on to make films known and appreciated around the entire world.